

## Ibn Rushd/Averroes and “Islamic” Rationalism

**Richard C. Taylor**

*Department of Philosophy, Marquette University, Milwaukee,  
WI 532021-1881, USA  
e-mail: mistertea@mac.com*

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### Abstract

The classical rationalist philosophical tradition in Arabic reached its culmination in the writings of the twelfth-century Andalusian Averroes whose translated commentaries on Aristotle conveyed to the Latin West a rationalist approach which significantly challenged and affected theological and philosophical thinking in that Christian context. That methodology is shown at work in his *Faṣl al-Maḳāl* or *Book of the Distinction of Discourse and the Establishment of the Relation of Religious Law and Philosophy* (c. 1280), although the deeply philosophical character of his subtle arguments has gone largely unappreciated. Here the philosophical foundations for his reasoning are exposed to reveal key elements of his rationalism. That approach is confirmed in his assertion in his later *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics* (c. 1290) that the highest worship of God is to be found first and foremost in the philosophical science of metaphysics rather than in the rituals of religion.

### Keywords

Rationalism, reason, religion, God, theologians, philosophers, Renaissance, double truth, metaphysics, creation, reflection, demonstration

The classical rationalist philosophical tradition in Arabic, represented by thinkers such as al-Fārābī, Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) and Averroes (Ibn Rushd), developed and expanded the rationalism of the Greek philosophical tradition into a powerful intellectual tool for seeking out truths concerning God, human beings and the world, independent of religious doctrines and Islamic teachings. Through the many scientific, medical and philosophical works translated in Toledo and in Sicily by Domingo Gundisalvi, Gerard of Cremona, Michael Scot and others, Christian thinkers in the Latin West learned of the power of human reason to attain truths without the aid of religion (Burnett). Arguably the most sophisticated rationalist tradition was that of Averroes, whose many commentaries on Aristotle's

key works challenged Christian beliefs on God, human nature and reason and exercised a powerful and multifaceted impact on the methods and doctrines of Christian theologians and philosophers in the high Middle Ages.

The Andalusian philosopher Ibn Rushd or Averroes (c. 1126-1198) has long enjoyed a reputation as a rationalist thinker of the classical Arabic tradition, a view held by his few readers in the Arabic tradition as well as by readers in the Latin West from the early thirteenth century through the Renaissance and beyond. The work of Ernest Renan in the nineteenth century on the rationalism of Averroes reflected this view. In the twentieth century, however, the extent of his rationalism was questioned in the light of some of his religious writings and his status as a *qāḍī*, or 'religious judge,' in Seville and later in Córdoba where he was grand or head *qāḍī*. George Hourani, for example, called attention to Averroes' piety in the famous *Faṣl al-Maqāl*, the title of which Hourani translated as "The Decisive Treatise, Determining the Nature of the Connection Between Religion and Philosophy" (Averroës, *Harmony* 44). In an article published in 1978, Hourani highlighted the religious aspects of Averroes' thought and in the great *Tahāfut al-tahāfut* (*Incoherence of the Incoherence*), a work written in refutation of al-Ghazali's *Tahāfut al-falāsifah* (*Incoherence of the Philosophers*), even found grounds for believing that Averroes maintained the personal immortality of the human soul in accord with Islamic teachings (Hourani 29-30; see also Marmura 289 and Taylor, "Averroes' Philosophical Analysis"). This sensitivity to Averroes' status as a Muslim who served the *umma* or Islamic community for most of his life as lawyer and judge is also found in the analyses of Averroes by current writers such as Alain de Libera in France, Oliver Leaman in the United States and United Kingdom and Massimo Campanini in Italy. De Libera has written that Averroes should be understood as asserting a "plurality of rationalities"—or, one might say, realms of discourse—in which philosophy and religion are separate fields for distinct rationalities (10-11). Leaman has similarly argued for a diversity of discourses and even has asserted that Averroes reasonably held a doctrine of double truth (*Brief Introduction* 170, 171-172; *Averroes and his Philosophy* 195-196; "Averroës, le *Kitāb al-naḥs* et la révolution" and "Ibn Rushd on Happiness and Philosophy"). In *Averroës*, published in 2007, Campanini (59-81, 107-111) argues for reason and religion as distinct realms of discourse, siding with Leaman against those who argue for a unity of truth in Averroes, that is, a single standard of truth accessible across the boundaries of religious statements and philosophical accounts (see works by Taylor).

In what follows, I will propound the view that Averroes is most suitably characterized as a thorough-going rationalist philosopher in the Aristotelian tradition. For present purposes I will consider the *Faṣl al-Maqāl* in depth and restrict my direct consideration of the other works to a passage from the *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, likely written ten or more years later, which serves to show the consistency of Averroes' rationalist project. I will conclude by setting forth briefly my understanding of the nature of the very special sort of strong rationalism I find in the work of Averroes, a strong rationalism which he regards as fully compatible with Islam.

***The Faṣl al-maqāl wa taqrīr mā baina al-sharī'a wa 'l-ḥikma min al-ittiṣāl***

This work, the title of which, following A. El Ghannouchi (145), I prefer to translate as, "Book of the Distinction of Discourse and the Establishment of the Relation of Religious Law and Philosophy," has as its explicit purpose, according to Averroes:

that we investigate [*naḥḥaṣu*] by means of *al-naẓar* of the sort found in religious law [*'ala jiha al-naẓar al-shar'i*], whether *al-naẓar* in philosophy and in the sciences of logic is permitted by religious law, prohibited or commanded, either by way of recommendation or by way of obligation. (*Book of the Decisive Treatise* 1)<sup>1</sup>

The precise meaning of *al-naẓar*, as used here, is to be handled with considerable care. In this professedly religious context, it means 'reflection,' in the sense of reflection on the meanings of scripture and even on God's creation. However, Averroes the philosopher knew it to have the sense of theoretical reflection and thought in the context of the Aristotelian division of the sciences into the productive, practical and theoretical, where "theoretical" is rendered in Arabic as *al-naẓarī*, the adjective derived from same root as *al-naẓar*. The significance of this point is easily overlooked when one reads the text solely in the context of religious law or *sharī'a*. The meaning and issue in the present context, however, becomes clear even in the lines that follow immediately.

At the outset Averroes draws on the ambiguous sense of *al-naẓar* as (1) religious reflection on the *sharī'a* as the religious law of God and on creation, and also (2) non-religious theoretical study employing a

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, translations throughout are mine.

philosophical methodology. He then proceeds to explain that *naẓar* is sanctioned insofar as it pursues the study of beings (*al-mawjūdāt*), to the extent that they are indicative of the Divine Artisan. He adds that the more perfect the knowledge (*al-maʿrifa*) of existing things is, the more perfect is the knowledge of the Divine Artisan. On the basis of this he concludes that the consideration of beings (*ʿtibār al-mawjūdāt*) which *al-naẓar* indicates “is either obligatory or recommended by the religious law [*bi ʿl-sharʿi*]” (*Book of the Decisive Treatise* 1).

Although *al-naẓar* as religious reflection is altogether different from philosophical *naẓar* as the philosophical study of the beings of the world taken up in the Aristotelian theoretical sciences of natural philosophy and metaphysics, Averroes implicitly denies that *naẓar* is equivocal and boldly asserts that the terms are essentially synonymous when used in these differing contexts. He does precisely the same for *qiyās*, which can denote either analogical reasoning in religious law or syllogistic argument in philosophy. In the religious and legal context this is the analogical reasoning brought to bear when principles from the *Qurʾān* and *ḥadīth* are applied to arguably similar cases in religious law in differing circumstances and times. However, in the philosophical context the term *qiyās* refers not to analogical reasoning but rather to rigorous syllogistic argumentation. Further, writes Averroes, “giving consideration [*al-ʿtibār*] is nothing more than extracting and deriving what is not known from what is known” (*Book of the Decisive Treatise* 2), a remark which to the philosophically trained ear is obviously reminiscent of Aristotle’s opening words of the *Posterior Analytics*: “All teaching and all intellectual learning come about from already existing knowledge” (Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* 110).<sup>2</sup> In light of this, it is no surprise that he goes on to proclaim that the Qurʾānic injunction, “Give consideration [*faʿtabirū*], you who have sight” (*Book of the Decisive Treatise* 2; *Qurʾān* 59:2), is a call for the use of *qiyās*—both religious and intellectual *qiyās*—in the consideration of beings (*ʿtibār al-mawjūdāt*) and the seeking out of knowledge of beings called for in the religious law (*al-sharʿ*).

Thus, (1) religious law obliges *al-naẓar*, or reflection on beings; (2) religious law also obliges the consideration of beings through intellect (*ʿtibār al-mawjūdāt bi ʿl-aql*); and (3) this consideration (*al-ʿtibār*) consists only of the inferring and drawing out the unknown from the known found in Aris-

<sup>2</sup> “All teaching and all intellectual learning is only through pre-existing knowledge” (*Kitāb al-taḥlīlāt al-thānīyah* 1.1, 71a1). References to Aristotle’s works throughout are given first by book and chapter, followed by Bekker pagination.

totelian scientific method. Further, he adds that: (4) “[I]t is obligatory that we carry out *naẓar* of beings by means of intellectual *qiyās* (*qiyās ‘aqlī*)” (Averroës, *Book of the Decisive Treatise* 2). Here Averroës understands this to be nothing more than philosophical syllogistic: the religious law obliges that we carry out theoretical investigation of all beings by means of intellectual or scientific syllogism. Moreover, he writes: (5) “It is clear that this method of *al-naẓar* which the religious law has called for is the most perfect of the kinds of reflection by the most perfect kind of *qiyās*, that which is called demonstration [*burhān*]” (Averroës, *Book of the Decisive Treatise* 2-3).

In this way Averroës sets in place in the opening pages of the *Faṣl al-Maqāl* nearly all the pieces of his argument. Philosophical study is not only permitted for those capable of carrying out scientific investigation on all the beings of the world insofar as they are indicative of the existence and nature of the Divine Artisan or God, but it is also obligatory. In the language of the philosophers, then, this investigation will be a philosophical study of the beings of the world and of their Cause, God, who is the Artisan of the universe. Such a study is neither practical nor productive but rather consists of the theoretical science of natural philosophy in the form of physics and cosmology and the manner in which both give indication of the immaterial cause of all, God. In this way the divine nature is to be the ultimate object of study carried out most perfectly in the Aristotelian theoretical sciences of physics (natural science) and metaphysics. This is the point of Averroës’ argumentation, though he does not draw out all the implications in the *Faṣl al-Maqāl*, a dialectical treatise based on religious law.<sup>3</sup>

To complete his methodological outline it remains for Averroës to forestall the possibility that there could be double truth, one for those who follow religion and religious law and another for those who pursue the understanding of creation and God by the philosophical methods of natural science and metaphysics. Given that there are various sorts of *naẓar* and *qiyās*, it may be possible that the distinct methods of religious law and philosophical demonstration yield conflicting conclusions on important issues. Despite scholarly assertions of a doctrine of double truth in the work of Averroës (e.g., Leaman, *Brief Introduction* 171-172), he himself is careful in the *Faṣl al-Maqāl* to reject such a notion. As I have shown elsewhere, he does so by baldly rejecting the possibility that demonstrative *naẓar* (*al-naẓar al-burhānī*) can differ from what is found in religious law (*al-shar‘*) and stating that: “Truth does not contradict truth but rather is

<sup>3</sup> For Averroës’ distinction of dialectical works from demonstrative works, see his *Tahafot at-tahafot* 427-428; trans. Incoherence 1: 257-258.

consistent with it and bears witness to it" (Averroës, *Book of the Decisive Treatise* 9).<sup>4</sup> In doing so, however, he elects not to divulge that his remark is nothing but a paraphrase of Aristotle's *Prior Analytics*: "li-anna-hu yajibu an yakūna al-ḥaqqu shāhidan li-nafsi-hi wa-mutafaqan min kulli jiha" (*Kitāb al-taḥlīlāt al-ūlā* 1.32, 47a8-9). Rather, he proceeds to explain how human assertions indicating assent to religious propositions can be contingent or necessary by reference to the way in which the assent is generated.

Religious law summons all humankind but it does so in three distinct ways. Some are called by way of rhetorical persuasion to provide their assent (*al-taṣḍīq*) through the imagination; others are called to provide assent through dialectical statements based on shared assumptions; and still others are summoned to assent by demonstration (*bi 'l-burhān*). Yet, while each gives full assent through the means suitable to the character and skill of each, the assent of the philosopher practicing the art of demonstration is of a distinctly different sort (Averroës, *Book of the Decisive Treatise* 8). This is because neither the emotive grounds of rhetorical persuasion nor the shared assumptions of dialectical reasoning are in themselves founded in what cannot be otherwise, in what is necessary. Only the certainty (*al-yaqīn*) of demonstrative knowledge consequent upon a validly formed demonstrative syllogism with true premises necessarily yields a conclusion which is incontrovertibly true and known to be true by that very demonstrative reasoning (Aristotle, *Kitāb al-taḥlīlāt al-thānīyah* 1.2, 71b18-24).<sup>5</sup> In those cases where certainty is established by demonstrative syllogism, the conclusion can be overturned neither by apparent contradictory statements in the religious law nor by community consensus (*al-ijmā'*). Consequently, in the case of religious law, Averroës asserts that, where there is difference between its apparent sense and the conclusion of a demonstrative syllogism, religious law must be interpreted to be in accord with the necessary truth achieved in demonstration. Further, he writes, if religious law is studied more comprehensively, there will be found state-

<sup>4</sup> See also Taylor, "Truth does not contradict truth."

<sup>5</sup> "By demonstration I mean a syllogism productive of scientific knowledge, a syllogism, that is, the grasp of which is *eo ipso* such knowledge. Assuming then that my thesis as to the nature of scientific knowing is correct, the premises of demonstrated knowledge must be true, primary, immediate, better known than and prior to the conclusion, which is further related to them as effect to cause. Unless these conditions are satisfied, the basic truths will not be 'appropriate' to the conclusion. Syllogism there may indeed be without these conditions, but such syllogism, not being productive of scientific knowledge, will not be demonstration" (Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* 112).

ments, the apparent sense of which is in accordance with or close to the interpretation required by the demonstrative conclusion (Averroës, *Book of the Decisive Treatise* 9-10). Averroës goes on to dismiss community consensus saying that, while it has a place in practical matters of action, “consensus is not determined regarding the objects of reflection [*fi ’l-naẓarīyāt* or, ‘theoretical matters’]” (*Book of the Decisive Treatise* 11), because of the epistemological difficulties of attaining consensus among the learned. This point is all the more evident, contends Averroës, since the learned in every era have advanced interpretations of religious law thought unwise to share with all people.

While the rationalist character of his account is perhaps evident in light of the preceding texts and remarks, we should note precisely the manner in which it is rationalist and what his rationalism entails. Averroës clearly asserts the primacy of philosophical consideration (*i’tibār*) through intellectual syllogistic *qiyās* ‘*aqlī* of a demonstrative sort (*burhānī*) as the proper type of reflection (*al-naẓar*) for reaching the most perfect knowledge of God, the Artisan of all beings. This is the religious obligation of philosophers and of all who are capable of the highest philosophical reflection. However, since God summons all human beings in the *Qur’ān*, those incapable of this most perfect sort of knowing follow religious law and the meaning of the *Qur’ān* as it is available to them, in accordance with their own intellectual and psychological abilities. In his argument, then, Qur’ānic pronouncements and the terms used in them are left to those who do not employ philosophical reasoning. These are individuals who understand *qiyās* as analogical reasoning employed in the application of statements and principles set forth in the *Qur’ān* and who understand *al-naẓar* as unsophisticated, non-scientific (non-philosophical) reflection on the world. However, primacy in the knowledge and worship of God lies with the philosopher who has access to proper scientific knowledge of the world and thereby also to the nature of its Artisan through natural human reasoning of a compelling demonstrative sort. It does not lie with the religious believer whose knowledge and worship come only from persuasive religious statements in the *Qur’ān* and other declared sacred sources, the truth of which is not immediately and *per se* evident. It is precisely this view that Averroës expresses boldly and without reservation in one of his last philosophical works, the *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*.

### **The *Tafsīr mā ba’d al-ṭabī’a* and the Strong Rationalism of Averroës**

As recent studies have indicated, the dating of the works of Averroës is a very difficult matter because of the dearth of manuscripts in the original

Arabic, the lack of knowledge about how his works were copied and disseminated, and, perhaps most challenging of all, the fact that he revised his works even after they had been released for copying and spread among his readers. Scholarly consensus dates the *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics* c. 1190 or generally in the last decade of his life.

In the second Comment of the first book of his *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, Averroes follows Aristotle in expressing appreciation for the efforts of predecessors. He then goes on to make a statement fully in accord with what I have expounded here in an Arabic text that was never translated into Latin in the Middle Ages. He writes:

The *sharī'a* specific to the philosophers [*al-sharī'atu 'l-khāṣatu bi 'l-ḥukamā'*] is the investigation of all beings, since the Creator is not worshipped by a worship more noble than the knowledge of those things that He produced which lead to the knowledge in truth of His essence—may He be exalted! That [investigation philosophers undertake] is the most noble of the works belonging to Him and the most favored of them that we do in God's presence. How great is it to perform this service which is the most noble of services and to take it on with this compliant obedience which is the most sublime of obediences! (*Tafsīr mā ba'd at-Ṭabī'at* 1: 10.11-10.16)

The rationalism of Averroes in the *Faṣl al-Maqāl* recognized a plurality of methods of assent to truths concerning both God as Artisan and all the beings formed by the Divine Artisan. There he found to be primary the truth to be garnered by assent through demonstrative syllogistic since, as demonstrative in the strict sense, this constituted the grasp of incontrovertible truth. In the face of conflict with the apparent meaning of the religious law, Averroes refused to assert the possibility of a double truth and instead insisted that the apparent meaning of religious law be recognized as incorrect and requiring interpretation of its inner meaning when in conflict with philosophical demonstration. Since this philosophical method yields truth in the fullest sense regarding God and all beings, the assertion here, while certainly bold if not shockingly blunt, follows in complete accord with the account in the *Faṣl al-Maqāl*: the most perfect form of worship is that which attains the most complete knowledge of God and his created works. This worship is most fully realized in the Aristotelian science which is devoted to the study of beings and their cause, God, namely the theoretical science of metaphysics.



## Conclusion

For Averroes the Aristotelian rationalism through which he understood the world was discordant neither with Islam nor with his understanding of the nature of religious belief. Indeed, quite the opposite was the case. Averroes conceived the fullest and most proper human expression of the worship of the Creator as that of the philosopher; at the same time, he fully understood the valuable role of religious law in the lives of all human beings. In his *Tabāfut al-tabāfut* (or *Incoherence of the Incoherence*), he writes:

the religions are, according to the philosophers, obligatory, since they lead toward wisdom in a way universal to all human beings, for philosophy only leads a certain number of intelligent people to the knowledge of happiness, and they therefore have to learn wisdom, whereas religions seek the instruction of the masses generally. (*Tabāfut at-tabāfut* 582; trans. *Incoherence* 1: 360)

According to Averroes, the rationality of philosophy, and of metaphysics in particular, constitutes the fullest form of the apprehension of created beings and of the Creator without thereby diminishing in any way the value of religious law. Indeed he even remarks that:

[I]t belongs to the necessary excellence of a man of learning that he should not despise the doctrines in which he has been brought up, and that he should explain them in the fairest way, and that he should understand that the aim of these doctrines lies in their universal character, not in their particularity, and that, if he expresses a doubt concerning the religious principles in which he has been brought up, or explains them in a way contradictory to the prophets and turns away from their path, he merits more than anyone else that the term unbeliever should be applied to him, and he is liable to the penalty for unbelief in the religion in which he has been brought up. (*Tabāfut at-tabāfut* 583; trans. *Incoherence* 1: 360)

Thus, the strong rationalism of Averroes can only suitably be called an “Islamic” rationalism insofar as he was raised a Muslim and insofar as Islam was for him in his day the fullest human religious expression of the worship which is carried out most perfectly not in the rituals of religion, but in the science of metaphysics.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In his *Incoherence of the Incoherence* Averroes writes: “[the philosopher] is under obligation to choose the best religion of his period, even when they are all equally true for him, and he must believe that the best will be abrogated by the introduction of a still better” (*Tabāfut at-tabāfut* 583; trans. *Incoherence* 1: 360). This paper is a product of the Aquinas and the Arabs Project at Marquette University. I want to express my gratitude to my colleague, Professor David Twetten, and Marquette University graduate student Fuad Rahmat for valuable discussions of the texts and issues considered here.

Given the extremes to which Averroes took his rationalist methodology, it is hardly surprising that he founded no school or tradition of followers in the Arabic philosophical tradition. Indeed, at that time the philosophical tradition had already begun to depart from classical rationalism, merging religious and philosophical teachings to develop what can suitably be called Islamic philosophy. In the Latin West, however, the translated writings of the Arabic classical rationalist philosophers, including Averroes, had a powerful impact on theological doctrines and, as Dag Hasse put it, “led to the transformation of almost all philosophical disciplines in the medieval Latin world” (Hasse). As such, the true heirs of Averroes and the classical rationalism he espoused in Andalusia were the Christians of Europe. These are the scholars who eagerly read the translations and then sought to integrate into their intellectual milieu significant portions of a powerful and challenging rationalism, fully indebted to more philosophically and scientifically sophisticated Muslim thinkers from a very different religious and cultural background.

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